

My journey to the Middle East was my third visit in twelve months. The last trip was in August of 2005 when we witnessed the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Our purpose on this trip was to view first hand our efforts to achieve a stable government in Iraq which could help bring a chance for peace to that troubled part of the world. In addition, visits with the foreign ministers in Greece, Jordan and Turkey would give us more insight into Iraq's neighbor's perceptions of the situation and also their view on Iran's intent to pursue nuclear status. Five days, five countries, it was a rigorous trip. This trip was coordinated by the efforts of Congressman Mike Pence (R-Ind.) and included four other Congressmen, beside myself.

GREECE

Flying through the night we landed in Greece, the birthplace of democracy on Friday morning. Early afternoon we had a working lunch with Mr. Yannis Valinakis, Deputy Foreign Minister of Greece. We thanked him for Greece's support in Afghanistan, its consistent partnership in NATO and their current efforts in the War on Terrorism. Most importantly, since Greece is now taking its turn as a rotating member of the United Nations Security Council, we asked if the government of Greece would vote for sanctions on Iran. This is an effort to bring about a resolution to prevent the Iranian government from pursuing nuclear weapons. While the Deputy Foreign Minister expressed differences in approach, he stated that Greece had no desire to see Iran with nuclear weapons and they would be supportive of our collective efforts.

JORDAN

The next morning our delegation flew to Jordan and we met with the prime minister and foreign minister of Jordan. King Abdullah II has been a consistent ally on the War on Terrorism and our efforts in Iraq. They are assisting in training the Iraq police force in Jordan, now numbering over 200,000 plus. Jordan has also been our partner on President Bush's road map to peace between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Authority.

The Jordanian intelligence agency is considered one of the best in the Middle East, and their efforts in helping us track down terrorist activities inside and outside of Iraq has been invaluable. Abdulilah Khatib, Prime Minister expressed a desire for the United States to better support Jordan's internal challenges. With Israel to the West, Syria to the North and Iraq to the East, Jordan is, to put it bluntly, in a tough neighborhood. With a population of a little more

than 5 million people, it has the largest percentage of Palestinians outside of Gaza and the West Bank. In addition, over 750,000 middle and upper middle class Iraqi's fled during the war with their families and now live safely in Jordan. Foreign aid, including support to pay for increase in oil costs, Jordan has little oil, was at the top of their list.

After our meetings we went to an afternoon lunch hosted by Prince Hassan at his royal palace in Amman. The palace is a large compound that the Prince shared with his brother, the late King Hussein. Prince Hassan has been on the world stage for four decades and has good perspectives on the issues we discussed. I found most interesting his summary of the challenges facing the world. The two major challenges the world will face in the 21st century, according to Prince Hassan, will be the competition, resolution and management of energy and water. Simply stated, conflicts will occur or be resolved by how we meet the challenges of dividing the world supply of energy and water. It is his belief, that until the developed nations are willing to sit down with the under-developed nations and begin a dialogue with plans on how we allocate these increasingly scarce and valuable resources conflicts and wars are likely to continue. It was a most thought-provoking and stimulating conversation.

In the late afternoon we had a two hour tour of Petra, settled by the Nabataens around 2,000 B.C. and once home to almost 100,000. Later that evening in Amman I had an opportunity to meet separately from our group with Jordanian Senator Akel E. Biltaji, who was born and raised in the West Bank in the town of Ramallah. He invited a Jordanian businessman to join us for dinner in the Hyatt Hotel where the terrorist attack killing 60 people took place last December during a wedding. My friend, Senator Biltaji was at the wedding and excused himself for twenty minutes. When he came back the explosion had occurred and the person occupying his chair was killed along with many others. The Senator was critical of the US handling of the Palestinian situation. It was another reminder of what part of the world we were in and how important different perceptions are.

IRAQ

After repacking and getting to bed about midnight, four o'clock in the morning came very early. Before departing the hotel, at breakfast Congressman Pence led us in a brief prayer. We flew at 5:30 a.m. in a C-130, a workhorse of America's military airlift capability for more than three decades, to Mosul on a three hour flight. Carrying our body armor and helmet reminded me of what our American men and women in our armed forces must do everyday in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, under very dangerous circumstances.

As we prepare to land in Mosul, I was able to get a seat up on the flight deck, looking over the shoulder of the pilot and co-pilot; it was clear that this was important agricultural region of Iraq. The Tigris River cuts through the city of Mosul providing most of the water resource for the region. Deplaning the C-130 we were met by Brig. Gen. Rickey Rife and his group of officers. We were immediately escorted to a building off the Tarmac for a 90 minute briefing. After twenty minutes, we politely informed the officer presenting the power point program and Gen. Rife, that we did not fly this distance to receive a briefing that could have taken place in Washington, D.C. During the next half-hour we were able to ask a lot of questions. Finally Gen. Rife escorted our delegation on a tour of the two bases on each side of the runway. Gen. Rife explained how in 2004 Mosul was in melt-down. Readers may remember the incident where a terrorist infiltrated the base and detonated himself in the U.S. Army mess hall killing and wounding over a hundred members of our military and civilian personnel. We then entered the centcom quarters for the region, where an amazing amount of hi-tech equipment was providing remote surveillance in real time for our men and women out in the field, including patrolling the city with Iraq police and army units. Following our briefing there, we visited with soldiers from our respective states. The California men and women I dined with were primarily from Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, most of them active duty personnel in their early twenties. Trying to engage them in conversation was slow at first. I asked whether they were well-supplied with complete body armor, humvee equipment, etc. They replied in the affirmative. I do believe some were a bit intimidated by being brought from their various duties to have lunch with a Congressman. The mess was large; it could probably feed about a thousand soldiers at a time with everything from cafeteria fare to Mexican food, pizza and pastas, fruit bar, sandwiches, freshly made hamburgers and two ice cream stands. In all, a fairly complete menu of America's taste buds plus wide screen television at every corner of the building, multi-channelled broadcast, courtesy of Americas Armed Forces Network. The favorite was clearly sports over newscasts from home. After asking these young men and women many questions, I came away impressed with both their conduct and courage. I asked them a last question; was there anything I could do for them or something they wanted me to take home? One soldier, who I believe felt we were out of anyone's hearing, said "Sir, it would be helpful if we had more boots on the ground here in Mosul."

Before departing to Baghdad we had a meeting with Vice-Governor Kashmala and MG Jamal of the regional government that included the city of Mosul. Their presentation was to highlight the success they had achieved in rebuilding the police force and stability within the regional government since the 2004 melt-down. Sadly, the Chief of Police informed us that he had lost two policemen that morning, I asked myself "how much progress are we making?" Following the meeting I had, an opportunity to board a Stryker. It is state of the art, hi-tech military vehicle that is used to patrol, carrying up to 12 soldiers at a speed in excess of 74 mph with a compliment of firepower. Ironically the Stryker was being driven by a young man from Fresno, Sgt. Jarrett Hile. I was pleased to meet someone from my hometown who was serving our country in Iraq.

My last observation on Mosul, as we put on our body armor and boarded the plane, is that it's difficult to get a feel for what's going on without spending more time here, and overnighting with our troops and meeting with Iraqis of various backgrounds. Gen. Rife informed us, that he would have liked to show us more, but was not able to provide helicopters to give us a better tour of the city and surrounding areas. As I tightened the strap on my helmet as we prepared to take off on the C-130 for Baghdad, I was reminded that our hosts wanted zero risk if possible, I am not sure they wanted to even provide the helicopter tour.

Approaching Baghdad in the afternoon was somewhat surreal. For three years I have seen the hazy skyline in countless pictures, now with a quick turn and steep decent into Baghdad International Airport, I was here. We taxied to a remote area of the airport, off-loading with a full compliment of equipment, it was 110 degrees with our body armor on. I have a whole lot more understanding for what our service men and women's challenges are and how body armor impacts one's mobility.

The journey from the plane to our Blackhawk helicopter had obvious security in mind. Flying over the suburbs of Baghdad, a city of over five million people it was clear this was a large city with much poverty. I looked down on the streets and was struck by the thought that even with its daily violence there seemed to be a high level of traffic and people on the major streets.

We landed in the green zone to meet with Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki only to learn that for security reasons our meeting place had to been changed. This was yet another reminder; notwithstanding the fact that we were in the supposedly secure green zone, that nowhere in Iraq was it considered entirely safe. Every member of this government is potentially a target for assassinations.

We were the first congressional delegation to meet the new Prime Minister. The meeting began with his introduction, greetings and explanation of what he was trying to accomplish. First, he said, was to form a unity government that would reflect the entire make-up of the country. Representatives of all Iraqi society, with the highest integrity and ability would be chosen to fill the posts in the various ministries. He then repeated what he has said numerous times, that after forming his new government his priorities would be to disband the militias, to significantly reduce the violence and to get reconstruction going. This would enable him and his government to work toward economic recovery and development, no small task I thought and easier said than done.

After the Prime Minister's opening statement we were able to pose questions. I said your Excellency, the goals and priorities you have set for your government seem to make sense! However, can you better explain to us how you will be able to achieve the results, when your country has had little history of democratic institutions, no real experience of public-private partnerships and, with all due respect, in my opinion, a tradition in this part of the world and in your country of corruption that is endemic? He responded by repeating in part, what he had stated earlier, that because he would appoint individuals of the highest respect from every major ethnic group in the country, that they would be able to move forward and succeed. I told him, I hoped that he was correct, but that in the next six months, by the end of this year, he needed to show early results, some tangible achievements. I told him something I believe he already knew, which was that a clear majority of Americans feel we have done our part and that our efforts in Iraq are going in the wrong direction. Thus the timing in attaining his country's goals was imperative in sustaining our country's long term support. The Prime Minister responded by telling our congressional delegation that victory was more important than timing! I said that while I understood his point, I feared if initial victories were not achieved he and his country might run out of time, that Americans were frustrated and running out of patience. He told us he understood.

Following our meeting, we departed for a live press feed at one of our U.S. compounds where we gave a live one minute feed to the networks back in New York, eleven time zones removed. In my comments I underlined what a fine job I thought our American men and women were doing in Iraq and how proud we were of them. But, I said that "Nation building is no easy task," the primary purpose of our nation's armed forces, was not to create and build democratic institutions elsewhere. To be successful this will be a long and difficult task much like what we experienced in South Korea, where we are still present today with almost 30,000 troops, over fifty years later.

Before our briefing with Ambassador Khalilzad and Gen. Casey, we had twenty minutes to visit Saddam Hussein's infamous parade grounds. This is where he would put his military on display, a la Soviet style to demonstrate his strength in the Arab world. The hallmark is the arch crossing swords marking the beginning and end of the parade route, embedded with the helmets of dead Iranian soldiers that support the swords. The hands were models of Saddam's hands that grip the swords. As we took pictures, I wondered about the mindset of Iraqi's that allowed them to be ruled by such a despot for so many years? The thought stayed in my mind for our next meeting.

We met with our Ambassador, Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad in one of Saddam Hussein's Palaces in the green zone, American embassy personnel now occupy it and were told that it was something of an issue with the Iraqi people and they were hoping to move to other quarters soon. We briefed Ambassador Khalilzad about our meeting with Prime Minister Al-Maliki.

Ambassador Kahlilzad was an Afghanistan immigrant to our country in the early 60's when he first settled in Ceres, California just south of Modesto. He was a member of the Rand Think Tank for Middle Eastern studies and rose in the ranks of our government to be appointed in 2003 as Ambassador to Afghanistan, his native country. Ambassador Khalilzad speaks fluent Arabic and is comfortable with the different religious sects of the Muslim faith. In late 2005 President Bush appointed him Ambassador to Iraq where everyone seems to give him high remarks. I jokingly asked him, what he did in a previous life to earn such easy and enjoyable embassy assignments, like Kabul and Baghdad! He laughed and related that sometimes his wife believes he should have his brain examined.

Congressmen Pence and Davis who had been to Iraq last year and had met with then Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, compared the two Prime Ministers in the following way. Jaafari was pompous, never answered questions directly and liked to lecture on what he knew about American history. Maliki by comparison was direct, answered the questions we asked, and seemed serious and focused. Ambassador Khalilzad replied that, because of Prime Minister Maliki's long history as a very religious Shiite, it was hoped, that this might be the right person at the right time in Iraq's history. I thought to myself, can he can stay alive long enough with members of his government intact to achieve his stated objectives.

In the same Palace complex, we met with General Casey. It was a direct and short briefing on his view of the morale of our troops, which he described as generally good, and the standing up of the Iraqi Army, which he explained as a work in progress with timetables that they were adjusting. It seems to me, we were not provided with enough detail to come away with any real conclusions of what was actually happening.

From this meeting we walked through a long series of hallways through a banquet room, that was now divided into office cubicles, where we were told Saddam Hussein used to hold his infamous dinners several times a year to test the loyalty of his Baath party members. He would serve two or three hundred party members a feast, only to explain half-way through the meal that those whose loyalty he questioned, that their food had been poisoned. When these individuals started choking, they would be hauled out of the room, with his remaining guests hearing the sounds of gun shots outside. Certainly not a party I would care to be invited to.

We shared a working dinner with a group of top embassy staff in the cabinet room where Saddam Hussein used to meet with his ministers and generals. We had a good conversation about the efforts and progress on reconstruction and getting Iraq's economy going again and, on what was working and what was not working so well. We have provided 37 billion dollars for reconstruction thus far. However, because of contract requirements such as security and other

factors, it was my impression there was more waste and inefficiency going on with our contractors, than the corrupt Iraqi companies. The U.S. Inspector General has basically confirmed this fact.

When we left our embassy staff to go back to the airport I had two thoughts: 1). How good of a handle, did our people have, on what was really going on out in the other cities and the rural areas: 2). Because of security constraints and the dangers involved, what a difficult job they must have in trying to assist the Iraqi government and private enterprises to make reconstruction happen.

Leaving the green zone we boarded the Blackhawk helicopter with some of America's finest and lifted off at dusk through the evening haze, I kept wondering to myself: what would constitute a successful effort that would allow our folks to come home. Many lights began to appear in the city, that we were generated for the most part by portable generators; because public electricity is still below prewar levels. As we landed again at the Baghdad airport with our body armor and helmets on, we seemed strangely detached from the sectarian violence that was taking place nearby every day. Indeed a paraphrased comment Secretary of State Colin Powell had said a little over three years ago, "this was like a pottery barn and if we broke it, we were going to have to try and fix it, and for the time it would be ours." I was coming to the conclusion that if we were going to be successful in stabilizing this country we would be here and in the area, because of the geo-politics, ie. oil, Iran, Israel and terrorism, for a long time.

As we took off steeply in our C-130, I was able to get a seat up on the flight deck looking over Baghdad at dark. I had two regrets and one wish. The regrets were that I had not been able to see more of our American men and women in uniform to ask whether or not they believe we have learned from our mistakes of the last two years and are doing a better job of protecting them. I also regretted that I was not able to get out among the average Iraqi people and find out from them what they thought and what solutions they felt would make sense. My wish is to go back in six months or by the end of the year to mark what progress and achievements have been made.

TURKEY

Landing in Amman, Jordan almost three hours later, we boarded our military jet for Turkey. We landed two hours later in Ankara and got to our rooms at two in the morning.

The next day we met with the Turkish Foreign Minister who we thanked for their support in Afghanistan. We inquired as to what their rationale was for meeting with the foreign minister of the Hamas Government of the Palestine Authority, when Hamas refuses to honor existing treaties and opposes Israel's right to exist. He stated that Turkey believes it has good relations with Israel and the PLO and it was Hamas who wanted to meet with them, and that they had promptly called the Israeli Foreign Minister to inform him. The response seemed weak. We asked what Turkey's position would be on Iran possessing nuclear weapons. The Foreign Minister went into great detail describing their long history and common border; Bottom-line they have no desire to see Iran with a nuclear arsenal and a delivery system, they indicated a preference to support a United Nations sponsored effort.

Because of my background growing up with so many Americans of Armenian descent in our Valley I felt compelled to ask the Foreign Minister, when Turkey was going to deal with the Armenian Genocide of 1915. I clearly remember the stories of my Armenian friends and neighbors of their families during that time in Turkey.

The Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul responded by articulating a different view, Turkey's version of what took place under the Ottoman Empire between 1912 and 1920. In my opinion it was clearly revisionist history. I suggested that whereas we are all proud of our respective countries, there are parts of our country's history such as slavery that we look back on and recognize as wrong and therefore we regret. The European Union and most historians in our country believe there is clear evidence that the 1915 Armenian Genocide occurred, and it was my opinion that at some point in time Turkey needed to meet with Armenia and resolve this long standing issue.

At lunch later in the day with members of the Turkish Parliament representing the different parties, we continued the same dialogue over the War on Terrorism, Iraq, Iran's desire to have nuclear weapons and relations with Armenia. It was a frank exchange, with a desire to continue the discussion on the important issues facing both our nations. Following this meeting, we had one final exchange with the Turkish National Security Council (their NSA). Ironically twenty minutes before we arrived the Iranians had just met with the Turkish NSA. The focus of our conversation was what support they would provide to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. This layer of Turkish government primarily consisting of their military, told us that they would cooperate, they had no desire in seeing Iran with whom they share a long border, having nuclear bombs. We again thanked them for their support in Afghanistan.

In leaving for the airport to fly that evening to Germany to visit our troops in the hospital, I began to reflect on our meetings with Turkish officials. Their support, along with their neighbors in the region, I feel is absolutely critical for success, if we are ever able to achieve stability and some level of peaceful co-existence. As far as the Armenian Genocide was concerned, it will take greater US and world pressure to create the conditions for Turkey to sit down with Armenia and resolve the past and the present. It might take the next generation, I hope not!

GERMANY

Leaving Ankara at 7:00pm on Monday evening, we arrive at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany around 8:30pm, where we were transferred to a hotel on base quarters. The next morning we had a briefing at breakfast with General Myers who wears two hats. He is currently Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the U.S. General in charge of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). We discussed NATO's role in maintaining our forces in the Middle East, and whether NATO was able to perform its changing mission for Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East. I asked critically; are NATO members willing to increase their contribution to meet the expanding challenges? No answers at this time, aside from the status quo rhetoric.

After breakfast, we went to the U.S. Hospital called Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC). I believe every delegation that visits the war theater in Afghanistan and Iraq should visit here before returning home. This is where our American commitment to engage and fight this "war on terror," good, bad and indifferent translates into reality. When you look into the eyes of our injured young men and women who including the loss limbs, will go home with different types of disabilities, you begin to truly understand the commitment we are making as Americans and it goes way beyond dollars and cents.

We saw one soldier who, four days before we were in Iraq, lost three of his fellow soldiers and one of his legs below his knee and the other above his knee. He has a 22-year old bride and they have been married for less than two years. The wounded soldier was trying to keep a brave face for us. We thanked him and told him how much we appreciated his service to our country. It seemed hugely inadequate, I wished I could do more.

Another soldier we glimpsed through a door that was slightly open in one of the Intensive Care Units was all hooked up and covered with bandages. The nurse informed us he had been wounded by an IED several days earlier in Iraq. His family had arrived at the hospital two days earlier but the nurse said she did not expect him to make it home alive.

I had a conversation with another soldier who had a puncture wound in his left leg and burns in his right foot. He was going to physically recover; but he told us how he had been injured while on patrol north of Baghdad the day before we arrived in Iraq. He was with two soldiers in an armored vehicle approaching a canal to cross over a bridge. He told me he saw a man near the ditch bank with two children, about 4 to 6 years in age. He thought he was not a threat because of the children. As they neared the end of the bridge, the IED exploded instantly killing the driver, as the vehicle began to roll over and he was about to be crushed, his mate down below unbuckled himself and brought this soldier down keeping him from being crushed. Unfortunately, as a result of his actions, his friend was ejected forty feet and died of head injuries. This is not an uncommon dilemma our soldiers face in Iraq and Afghanistan. I thanked him for his service to our country and told him to call me if I could help him or his family. This young man will probably for the rest of his life wonder, if he had taken out the trigger man sitting next to the children, might he have saved the lives of his fellow soldiers.

We thanked the women and men who work in our hospital at Landstuhl, many of them from reservist and national guard units. One-third of those Americans serving in the middle east are from either the National Guard or Reserve Units, soldiers who have left their family's, jobs, careers, or businesses to serve our country, this I believe is important to remember. It's also a dilemma as we look at our arm forces and their missions in the future to protect and provide security for our nation.

CONCLUSION

As we took off at noon on Tuesday for Washington, DC on a 7 ½ hour flight for session that evening, I tried to recount what I saw and learned during the last five days.

It is clear to me in hindsight the reasons we used to justify our invasion into Iraq; were no longer the reasons we are using for our continual presence in fighting this war. While we should debate for future efforts on how and when we should commit American forces in harms way, conservatives estimates by the Pentagon indicate it will cost American taxpayers \$60 billion plus, to replace and upgrade our armed forces when this effort is stabilized. Thus, the most important question becomes, what do we do now?

American patience as I told Prime Minister Maliki is wearing thin. I do believe within the next

year, considering the loss of lives and injuries of our service people and over 300 billion taxpayer's dollars spent, we need to give an opportunity for this freely elected Iraqi government to succeed. At the same time we have to begin a process to redeploy our forces in Afghanistan, and to insure the straits of Hormuz are protected. If negotiation with our allies to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons are unsuccessful, we need to enforce a version of a Cold-War against the regime in Iran. We need to reassure our allies (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) in the Middle East that we will continue to maintain a significant presence of force for stability and peace in the region.

We must improve our efforts and thus our relationships in the Islamic world. Focusing on poverty and education, a type of Marshall Plan, would provide us with the chance for long term success.

Finally, America must get real and be willing to make sacrifices at home with far less reliance on energy from the Middle East. This requires a bi-partisan plan that is well thought out, flexible and could require us to make sacrifices for energy security. One that couples timelines with goals based on energy use that our citizens will know are achievable. That's what I believe America must do as a country!